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ABSTRACT

Communication teachers can use magic in the classroom to teach the selective nature of the communication process and principles of general semantics. Since magic "works" due to perceptual limitations, selective perception can be illustrated through various magic effects. Magical effects where the secret is apparent to everyone in the class except for one member can show the students that an individual's perception is limited and selective. Several principles of general semantics, including "nonallness" and "nonidentity," can similarly be illustrated through the use of select magic effects. The three best ways that teachers can learn magic that can be used in the classroom are from books, from video tapes, and from personal instruction. Some teachers might desire to start performing magic in their classes but hesitate to do so. Magic is a novel, fun, and interesting way to gain students' attention, to keep their attention focused on the subject matter of the class, and to teach them something in the process. (Contains 37 references.) (RS)

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Magic in the Classroom

Using Conjuring to Teach Selectivity and General Semantics

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Magic in the Classroom:

Using Conjuring to Teach Selectivity and General Semantics

The use of magic as an instructional tool/visual aid is introduced. It is proposed that magic can be profitably used in the educational setting as a novel means of adding emphasis to or illustrating a point. Means whereby the communication teacher can use magic in the classroom to teach principles of selectivity and general semantics is explored. Since magic "works" due to our perceptual limitations, selective perception can be illustrated through various magic effects. Magical effects where the secret is apparent to everyone in the class except for one member can show the students that one's perception is limited, is selective. Several principles of general semantics, including nonallness and nonidentity, can similarly be illustrated through the use of select magic effects. Guidelines for how teachers can learn magic are offered. It is contended that magic can be a novel, fun, and interesting way for teachers to gain their students' attention, to keep their attention focused on the subject matter of the class, and to teach them something in the process.

Magic in the Classroom:

Using Conjuring to Teach Selectivity and General Semantics

Magic has been used in the educational setting (through "school shows" and individual performances by teachers) to emphasize and illustrate diverse messages directed toward students from elementary to secondary levels. The messages in "school shows" have included increasing safety awareness, increasing interest in reading, and preventing drug and alcohol abuse. Magic has also been used by some teachers in the classroom as a way of gaining and keeping the interest of their students (Severn, 1979). In this paper, I discuss how magic can be used in the communication classroom as a novel means for teaching certain principles of selectivity in communication and select areas of general semantics theory.

Magic is a great deal of fun! It is enjoyable to perform and enjoyable to experience. Though magic is not always art, it can be a performance art if the magician is an artist (Maskelyne, & Devant, 1946). According to Williams (1988), there are five keys to success in magic: desire, practice, enthusiasm, people skills, and more practice. Many people famous outside of magic have been attracted to the art, such as Harry Anderson, Johnny Carson, Dick Cavett, Prince Charles, Cary Grant, Arsenio Hall, Michael Jackson, and Steve Martin (Davenport, 1992). Magic has been identified as an excellent way to make presentations more effective. Jeffreys (1989b) identified three reasons why magic works so well in presentations, such as speeches or lectures:

> **1) It is the ultimate visual aid.** Think about it. Practically all speech books talk about the power of using visual aids in speeches. What could be more visual than a magic trick? Suppose you were giving a speech on problem solving, when suddenly, you took out a handkerchief with the word PROBLEMS written across it, and caused it to disappear. Your audience would love it and you would have their undivided attention.
> **2) It appeals to people of all ages.** No matter how young or how old people are, they love to have their senses challenged. In addition, magic has no boundaries when it comes to race, geography, or income. Rich or poor, fat or thin, black or white, Russian or American; magic appeals to practically everyone.
> **3) It can be tied into just about any topic.** Instead of writing the word PROBLEMS on the handkerchief as in the preceding example, you could write the word PROCRASTINATION. After making the handkerchief vanish, you could then give a speech on how to make procrastination disappear from one's life. (p. 11)

Magic can be profitably used in the educational setting as a novel means of adding emphasis to or illustrating a point. This paper will explore how the communication teacher can use magic in the classroom to teach principles of selectivity and general semantics.

The selective nature of the communication process affects our communicative behavior in all contexts. This is usually discussed while examining the role of perception in communication at some point in our basic communication courses, both public speaking and interpersonal communication (Adler, Rosenfeld, & Towne, 1989; Adler, & Towne, 1987; DeVito, 1989; DeVito, 1990b; Gamble, & Gamble, 1982; Gamble, & Gamble, 1987; Myers, & Myers, 1985; Pearson, & Nelson, 1988; Taylor, Meyer, Rosegrant, & Samples, 1989). In addition, principles of general semantics are often discussed in interpersonal communication courses in sections dealing with language or perception (Adler, Rosenfeld, & Towne, 1989; Adler, & Towne, 1987; DeVito, 1989; DeVito, 1990b; Gamble, & Gamble, 1982; Myers, & Myers, 1985). General semantics formulations are also occasionally included in public speaking textbooks (Bradley, 1988; DeVito,

1990a; Hanna, & Gibson, 1989). This paper focuses more on the interpersonal communication classroom, but does have applicability to other communication classes as well.

First, I will discuss how magic can be used in teaching principles of selectivity in communication. The principles of selectivity discussed in our basic texts include selective perception, selective exposure, selective attention, and selective retention. Selectivity itself refers to the premise that "we neglect some of the stimuli in our environment and focus on a few [other stimuli]" (Pearson, & Nelson, 1988). Taylor, Meyer, Rosegrant, and Samples (1989) define selectivity of attention, exposure, perception, and retention as "choosing, consciously and unconsciously, what stimuli we will expose ourselves to, attend to, perceive, and recall from storage" (p. 426). Some texts seem to use selective perception as an umbrella term which appears to "cover" selective exposure and selective attention while leading to the phenomenon of selective reception. According to Kreps (1990), selective perception is "the process by which people attend to the most important messages out of the total pool of potentially perceivable messages and use those chosen messages to make sense out of their current situation" (p. 30). Kreps identifies three interrelated parts to selective perception: selective attention, habituation, and closure. I will discuss these parts of selective perception in more detail after discussing selective exposure and selective retention.

Selective exposure is "the tendency to close ourselves to new experiences" (Gamble, & Gamble, 1987, p. 69). Gamble and Gamble (1987) illustrate the phenomenon of selective

exposure through relating research which indicates Democrats tend not to open mail from Republicans, and Republicans tend not to open mail from Democrats. Thus, "voters chose to expose themselves to only that information with which they already agreed" (p. 56). Selective retention refers to "the recollection of information after selection, organization, and interpretation have occurred; the mental categorization, storage, and retrieval of selected information" (Pearson, & Nelson, 1988, p. 407). In simpler language, selective retention means "we categorize, store, and retrieve certain information, but discard other information" (p. 32).

As noted earlier, selective perception has three interrelated parts: selective attention, habituation, and closure (Kreps, 1990). According to Pearson and Nelson (1988), selective attention means "we focus on certain cues and ignore others" (p. 32) or "a focus on particular stimuli such that other stimuli are ignored" (p. 407). For example, two people in deep conversation might not "hear" a television which is on in the background. Habituation is "blocking out extraneous or unimportant messages in any situation" (Kreps, 1990, p. 30). Closure refers to "putting together the messages collected through selective attention and arranging them into a meaningful configuration" (p. 30). Kreps goes on to discuss the relationship between selective perception and communication.

> People select some messages and not others because of their unique past experiences and predispositions. They not only select the messages that they consider most important but also rank the messages they attend to. The more important messages are given more cognitive space (attention), and less important messages are afforded less cognitive space. . . .
>
> Selective attention and habituation work hand in hand and operate simultaneously. Habituation is crucial. In order to give full attention to any set of messages chosen as being

> important, individuals must be able to block out both external messages and internal messages that they judge to be unimportant sources of information in any given situation. . . .
>
> In undertaking closure, individuals must make sense of the current situation using limited information gathered from the messages attended to. This is done by filling in the blanks between messages through educated assumptions based on the perceivers' past experiences and sense of logic. . . .
>
> Since each person develops a method of perceiving the world through his or her own version of selective perception, it is likely that different people will select different messages on which to focus. . . . The decisions people make about which messages to attend to in selective attention, which messages to block out in habituation, and which message configurations and assumptions will help them create closure are almost always based on the experiences they have had. The unique experiences individuals have had lead them to make different choices and perceive different realities through the selective perception process. These individual differences in the selective perception process lead to divergent creations of meaning by different people. . . .
>
> A major implication of the perceptual differences among people is the need for interpersonal communication to check and clarify the meanings that people create. . . . People cannot exchange meanings; they can exchange only messages in communication. The more effective the messages they send to one another, the more likely it is that communicators will be able to create overlapping (similar) meanings, thereby sharing information and developing communicative understanding. (pp. 31-32)

Selective perception, selective exposure, selective attention, and selective retention can all be illustrated through magical illusions. In fact, the primary reason magic "works" is due to the limits of our perceptual capabilities. A famous magic effect created by Slydini, "Flight of the Paper Balls," can be used in conjunction with the often cited parable of the six blind men (who describe an elephant in six different ways) to illustrate how we each actually sense very little out of all that we could possibly sense (Myers, & Myers, 1985). The effect, "Flight of the Paper Balls," involves the magician throwing paper balls (generally made of tissue paper) over the head of one spectator as the rest of the audience looks on. The audience can see the paper balls flying over the spectator's head, yet the spectator has no idea to where the balls disappear. Due to the

strong misdirection built into the effect, the paper balls seem to disappear into nothingness from the perspective of the one spectator (*Stars of Magic*, 1975). This effect illustrates to both the student in front of the class and the rest of the class that one does not see "all" of what is happening. One's perception is limited, is selective. Because the magic effect is highly interactive and requires participation from the entire class, it may be able to "communicate" the concept more substantially than just reading the parable. In fact, almost all magic effects illustrate that our perception is limited. I believe students will understand that if they could perceive all, then they would not be fooled. Because many people find magic inherently interesting and entertaining, perhaps the students will be even more interested in the discussion of selectivity in communication due to the rather unique way it is presented.

Two of the basic principles of general semantics, nonallness and nonidentity, can also be illustrated through the use of magic. Nonallness and nonidentity are two of the three "bedrock" premises of general semantics (DeVito, 1971; W. Johnson, 1946). According to Frasier (1991), "General semantics was formulated as a method for developing a truer 'language-to-fact' relationship between the structure of our language and the structure of reality" (p. 9). According to Hayakawa (cited in Wanderer, 1991), "General semantics is the study of the relations between language, thought, and behavior--between how we talk, therefore how we think, and therefore how we act" (p. 36). He also defined general semantics as "the science of how not to be a damn fool" (p. 32).

Alfred Korzybski (1958) developed general semantics in response to the Aristotelian system of thought. According to Korzybski, "one of the most pernicious bad habits which we have acquired 'emotionally' from the old [Aristotelian] language is the feeling of 'allness', of 'concreteness', in connection with the 'is' of identity and elementalism" (p. 379). Korzybski goes on to state that allness is "the semantic foundation for identification" (p. 404). The Aristotelian system of thought, the "old language," is based upon the "is" of identity, which is fundamental to the Aristotelian "laws of thought." These basic assumptions of the Aristotelian system are the Laws of:

Identity: A is A; whatever a thing is, it is.

Contradiction: Everything is either A or not A; nothing can both be and not be.

The Excluded Middle: Nothing is both A and not A; everything must either be or not be.

In contrast to the Aristotelian laws of thought (which Korzybski believed were responsible for the false-to-fact evaluations in our Western culture), general semantics has three basic principles:

Nonidentity: A is not A; the word is not the thing; the map is not the territory.

Nonallness: A is not all A; the word does not represent all of the thing; the map does not represent all of the territory.

Self-Reflexiveness: Words can be stated about words; maps can be made of maps; the map includes the map-maker.

According to W. Johnson (1946), these three principles are "the basic premises, the bedrock, of the whole system of general semantics" (p. 184).

Allness "is the tendency to think you have said all there is to say on a subject when you've said only all you can think of at the moment" (Froman, 1986, p. 395). K. Johnson (1972) states: "When we talk or write, we tend to act as if we know 'all' about a subject, as if we have said all about it" (p. 11). The principle of nonallness states that "we can never know or say all about anything" (DeVito, 1971, p. 6). It refers to the premise: "The word does not represent all the object; the map does not represent all the territory; what is abstracted on one level does not represent all that is abstracted on a lower level" (Johnson, 1946, p. 184).

Allness and nonallness are related to selectivity. According to Froman (1986), "The point is that no verbal description of an object can make it possible for a hearer or reader to reproduce that object exactly, because no description can cover every detail. Words are only labels for a few selected details of the speaker's vision of that thing" (p. 395). K. Johnson (1972, p. p. 11) outlines this process:

1. Our sense organs abstract (select) from our environment.
2. We select what we pay attention to.
3. The words we select to describe an object or event tell about only *some* of the characteristics.
4. "All human knowledge is purchased at the price of ignoring something else."
   -- J. Robert Oppenheimer

This process mirrors the earlier discussion of selectivity. It is important to realize that the environment from which our sense organs abstract is infinitely complex and in a constant state of

change, i.e., reality should be conceived as process. DeVito (1971) states: "Outside our skins there is a "reality" -- a "real" world -- which is infinitely complex and ever changing. Because of this infinite complexity *we can never say all about anything*, there is always something we do not perceive, something we do not understand" (p. 63). Allness is when "we *act as if* we do know and are saying all" (p. 63). Due to the relationship between nonallness and selectivity, I propose that the magic effects used to illustrate selectivity can "play double duty" in illustrating the principle of nonallness as well.

The principle of nonidentity states that "in the real world no two things are identical" (DeVito, 1971, p. 6). In the terms frequently used in the literature of general semantics, nonidentity means: "The word is not the object; the map is not the territory; an abstract on one level is not the same as an abstract on any other level" (Johnson, 1946, p. 184). Though this principle seems obvious, identification does occur. "The identification of which we speak is that seen, for the most part, in those instances in which people *act as if* the word were the object" (p. 172). Johnson discusses how people in the past identified the word "syphilis" with the disease such that they would not use the word, and thus effective treatment methods were not discussed and used. Further, Johnson states:

> People acted toward the word *syphilis* very much as they did toward what it presumably represented. They sought to avoid not only syphilis, but also the word *syphilis*. Their behavior was remindful of primitive word magic, in accordance with which it is naively assumed that by controlling the word one controls the thing it stands for--that by not speaking *syphilis* one somehow prevents syphilis. Identification of word and object, in this general

> sense, is no abstract professorial nonsense. Identification of this sort constitutes one of the most serious aspects of our social, as well as our intimately personal, problems of adjustment, growth, and survival. (p. 173)

One of the primary goals in general semantics is for the general semanticist to become conscious of the process of abstraction. Whatever we perceive is an abstraction of reality, only part of what actually exists. Lee (1941) states that, "*Consciousness of abstracting* as a habitual reaction will lead directly to attitudes of non-allness. This consciousness is the coveted first step in *proper evaluation*, for when men act as if what they say says "all," delusions and improper evaluations are inevitable" (p. 63). Read (1975) states that, "Consciousness of abstracting is central to general semantics theory, and involves the continuing awareness that at different neurological levels of our functioning we omit some factors, select others, that we summarize and generalize in a new form on higher orders" (p. 246). Korzybski summed this up by stating: "One of the main points in the present A-system [general semantics] is first to remove entirely from our *s.r.* [semantic reactions] this 'allness' and 'concreteness', both of which are structurally unjustified and lead to identification, absolutism, dogmatism, and other semantic disturbances" (pp. 379-380).

The principle of nonallness can be illustrated by magic in much the same way as selectivity is illustrated as already discussed. The principle of nonidentity can be illustrated by discussing how we identify certain objects as "being" a certain way due to our experience with similar objects. Though this generally helps us move through the world, it can also lead us "down the wrong track" at times. The success of a magical illusion often hinges upon the magician leading his or

her audience "down the wrong track" through the use of props which are not really as they appear to be. In addition, the words which a magician uses to describe his or her props can also lead his or her audience to identify the prop incorrectly (verbal misdirection). This identification leads to the success of the deception. For example, a paper bag with a cellophane covered hole cut in the back can be used to illustrate how identification can lead to deception. If pairs of balls with different colors are in the bag, the teacher can fool one student while letting the rest of the class into the method of the trick, as in Slydini's "Flight of the Paper Balls." The teacher/magician places the student at the front of the class and holds the paper bag with the window facing the class. The solid side of the bag is toward the student. The teacher can then place the matching pairs of balls (or handkerchiefs or whatever) into the bag. The student removes one of the balls without looking from the bag. The teacher and the rest of the class can see what color ball the student removes. The teacher can then "see the colors with his or her fingertips" and remove the ball with the matching color. This can be repeated with all of the balls. Since the teacher refers to the paper bag with a window as just a "paper bag," the student identifies what the teacher holds as being like other paper bags with which the student has been acquainted. Most paper bags do not have windows built in. Thus, the student's identification of the paper bag as being like other paper bags allows the teacher to fool the student while allowing the rest of the class into the secret of the deception. With other magic effects designed to deceive all of the audience, a teacher can emphasize these points without exposing the secrets behind the magic. Though it is often not an

ethical problem to expose a simple children's trick, it is never appropriate for a teacher to expose the secret behind any magic effect beyond very simple children's tricks and puzzles, or those effects designed to be exposed.

In this paper, I have chosen not to expose the secrets of any magical effects which are not designed to be exposed in the process of performance. Thus, I have chosen not to discuss how other specific magic effects can be used in the communication classroom. Instead, I have sought to provide the theoretical framework underlying the issues of selectivity and general semantics, and to provide broad guidelines for integrating magic into the illustration of those issues. The individual effects used in the classroom will depend on what the individual teacher learns.

How does one learn the magic which can be used in a classroom? Probably the three best ways are from books, from video tapes, and from personal instruction. Personal instruction (often $40+ an hour) and magic videos (often $50 each) can both be rather expensive. Thus, I would recommend that most beginning magicians begin with a few good books. Probably the best place to begin is at the library (Dewey decimal system 793.8). If your local library does not have enough material, or if you decide you want to delve deeper into the art of magic, let me make a few book recommendations (these are all just my own opinion). The best one volume course in magic is *Mark Wilson's Complete Course in Magic*, by Mark Wilson and Walter Gibson (1988). The hardbound edition of this book is available at a very modest price with a few props included. Of the single books I will recommend, this is the most-encompassing, the easiest understood, and

probably the best overall. The best multi-volume course in magic is the seven volume *Tarbell Course in Magic*. Harlan Tarbell wrote the first six volumes, and Harry Lorayne wrote the seventh volume (1941-1972). *The Tarbell Course in Magic* is one of the best investments in magic that you can make. However, the complete course in not inexpensive when compared to the other magic books referenced, even when bought used. Unless you decide to make magic a hobby or semi-profession, you probably will not decide to make this large of an investment. One of the best beginning magic books is Dr. Charles Pecor's (1979) *The Craft of Magic*. Unfortunately, this wonderful book is no longer in print. However, it can be found in many public libraries. Dr. Pecor also gave me permission to photocopy the book for the students in a magic class I taught through the Continuing Education department at Southern Illinois University at Carbondale. I would imagine he would not mind if others also photocopied the book for their own personal use. There is a greater emphasis on sleight-of-hand in this book than in the other beginning books referenced. Another book with an emphasis on sleight-of-hand is Bill Tarr's (1976) *Now You See It, Now You Don't*. The clear illustrations and Bill Tarr's lucid prose help to make this book an excellent introduction to sleight-of-hand. Peter Eldin's (1985) small paperback *The Magic Handbook* is an excellent bargain, as it can be found in many libraries and bookstores. Michael Jeffreys' (1989a, 1989b) two books on speaking and selling with magic are both fairly expensive and difficult to find. However, Jeffreys assumes that the reader is a total novice to magic, and he does teach some good effects in his two books. Of particular note is his

discussions of how to use magic as a visual aid in speaking and selling. *The Klutz Book of Magic*, by Cassidy and Stroud (1990), also assumes that the reader is a magical novice. Since it includes a few props, it is rather expensive. However, it is a good beginning book for someone who is not yet sure if this "magic stuff" is for them. This book contains enough good magic for you to determine if you would enjoy performing magic. *Bill Severn's Guide to Magic as a Hobby*, by Bill Severn (1976), is an excellent introduction to the many hobbies that make up the "meta-hobby" of magic. It is not a collection of tricks, but a (slightly dated) "tour" through the wonderful world of magic. Williams' (1988) *The Rosen Photo Guide to a Career in Magic* is a short discussion of magic as a career written for children. The *Stars of Magic* collection is not for the beginner. However, it does include Slydini's "Flight of the Paper Balls," which is an excellent effect to learn. So, you might want to check it out, as many of the classics of close-up magic were first introduced in it's pages. Finally, one of the greatest books on magic ever written is *Our Magic: The Art in Magic, the Theory of Magic, the Practice of Magic*, by Nevil Maskelyne and David Devant. This is possibly the finest book yet written dealing with the theory and philosophy of magic. If you just want to know a few tricks to do for your kids, then this is probably not the book for you. However, every serious magician should read and study this monumental work.

If you "get into" magic, you will probably want to buy a few tricks and props. Two of the major suppliers of magic books, videos, tricks, and props are Abbott's Magic Company (Colon, Michigan 49040; 616-432-3235/ 432-3236) and Louis Tannen, Inc. (6 W. 32nd St., 4th Floor,

New York, NY 10001-3867; 212-239-8383). You should also check out local magic shops in your area. Michie discusses the "etiquette" of visiting a magic shop:

> First, please feel free to do so! They are public places; you need no secret passwords! In fact, amateurs, even beginners are welcome. New customers! (Accomplished magicians mostly just stand around and swap lies with each other about how many shows they did last week.)
>
> Identify yourself as a novice. It saves your and the sales[person]'s time. He [or she] will demonstrate an effect or two, but the secret is never revealed until the trick is purchased. (The "secret" is the significant part, so don't be surprised to pay a dollar for something that could be made for a dime.)
>
> You are not obligated to buy everything (or anything) he [or she] shows you, but hopefully one of the first three or four will interest you. The sales[person]'s enthusiasm will diminish if he [or she] gets the feeling he's [or she's] putting on a free show. (p. 2)

If you do decide to make magic a hobby, there are a few authors in magic of which you should be aware. All of these authors write excellent books on magic. The authors whose names you should be looking for include Michael Ammar, John Booth, Eugene Burger, David Ginn, Paul Harris, Richard Kaufman, Harry Lorayne, Daryl Martinez (often writes under just "Daryl"), Stephen Minch, Gary Ouellet, Samuel Patrick Smith, and Dai Vernon. Brad Burt's Magic Shop (4690 Convoy St. #103, San Diego, CA 92111; (619) 571-4749) produces an excellent, reasonably-priced series of videos on basic sleight-of-hand. Having these can make learning the routines in the books easier.

Some might desire to start performing magic in their classes but hesitate to do so. There are four reasons often given for hesitating to "taking up" magic (Jeffreys, 1989a; Jeffreys, 1989b). First, some complain that they are not very good with their hands. However, according to Jeffreys (1989b):

> Having quick or graceful hands is NOT a prerequisite for being able to do magic. Proper execution of technique, knowing when and how to misdirect an audience, and being able to present a trick in an entertaining manner are what make a good magician. (p. 15)

The second reason some people give is that they do not have time to practice. However, one can practice magic while doing other things such as watching tv, waiting in line, etc. It is possible to quickly learn some easy-to-do effects. The best advice about managing one's practice time is to learn one magic effect really well. Once one is learned well, then you can move on to a second, and so on. According to Burger (1987), "The magician is *created* one effect at a time." The third reason some people give is that they feel magic is just for kids. However, magic is not just for children. People of all ages enjoy magic. David Copperfield could not really be called a "kids' magician." Anyone who has seen his highly rated television specials realizes that magic has a universal adult appeal. The final reason that some people give is that they do not have the right kind of personality to do magic. However, there is no one personality for performing magic. There are as many different performing personas as there are performing magicians. The key to being an effective magician is to be yourself. Sometimes, it is helpful to be an even more likeable version of yourself. Yet, the point is there is no particular personality which cannot effectively perform magic.

Besides illustrating how much fun a teacher can have by bringing magic into the classroom, I hope to show that the use of conjuring can have a place in the communication teacher's repertoire for focusing on vital communication principles. It is a novel, fun, and interesting way to gain our

students' attention, to keep their attention focused on the subject matter of the class, and to teach them something in the process. Through the discussion of this rather "quirky" way of presenting the information about selectivity and general semantics, I hope to encourage other teachers to try novel and hopefully interesting ways of presenting different subjects in their own classrooms. Perhaps an interpersonal communication teacher who learned ventriloquism could illustrate different principles of interpersonal communication through having a conversation with his or her "dummy."

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